AMENDMENT TO THE CLAIMS

1. (currently amended) A computer implemented system for distributing in real-time, inventory data acquired from point-of-sale systems at any one of a plurality of retail systems, comprising:

~~(a)~~ a plurality of in-store systems~~, for processing, storing, and communicating data~~each in-store system located at a place of business of a merchant and comprising;

at least one point-of-sale device used to process sales transactions for generating sales transaction data and generating inventory data;

a memory database used to store a merchant identifier, the sales transaction data and the inventory data;

an in-store communicator used to transmit the merchant identifier, a merchant network address and the inventory data over a communication network;

a host system operably coupled to the in-store systems over the communication network and comprising:

a host system database for indexing and storing the inventory data, the merchant identifier and the merchant network address for each in-store system;

a host system communicator used to receive and transmit data;

a data distributor for processing requests for inventory data by accessing the inventory data stored in the host system database or retrieving current inventory data from one of the in-store systems;

~~(b) a plurality of~~a subscriber system~~s~~ operably coupled to the host system over the communication network ~~for generating and processing requests for data~~ and comprising:

a virtual store server useable to request the host system for inventory data indicative of a given merchant and to process online sales of goods or services offered for sale by the given merchant; and

a browser component useable by a consumer to view the requested inventory data from the host system by accessing the requested inventor data on a web page generated by the data distributor.

~~(c) a host system, operably coupled to the in-store systems and the subscriber systems, for processing, storing, and communicating data between the plurality of subscriber systems and the plurality of in-store systems.~~

2. (previously presented) The computer implemented system of claim 1, wherein the in-store systems, the subscriber systems and the host system are coupled to one another through a communication network configured to transmit and receive data among the in-store systems, the subscriber systems, and the host system, and to support one of a transmission control protocol/internet protocol (TCP/IP) and hypertext transfer protocol (http).

3-5. (canceled)

6. (currently amended) A method for processing and distributing real-time inventory data through a communication network, comprising the steps of:

~~transmitting~~ receiving ~~current~~ inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data from an in-store system ~~to a host system~~ over the communication network;

indexing and storing the ~~current~~ inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data ~~using~~ in a host system database ~~at the host system~~;

retrieving current inventory data from the in-store system using the indexed and stored merchant network address to initiate communication with the in-store system ~~processing requests for inventory data with a data distributor in the host system using said indexed and stored inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data~~ in response to receiving a request for current inventory data from a subscriber system for a particular merchant; and

~~transmitting~~ formulating a response to said subscriber system using the current inventory data.

7-10. (canceled)

11. (currently amended) The computer implemented system of claim ~~5~~1, wherein the inventory data is sent periodically from the in-store systems to the host system, and wherein the host system is configured to either forward the inventory data to the subscriber system or store the inventory data in the host system for later access by the subscriber system.

12. (currently amended) The ~~method~~ computer implemented system of claim ~~6~~1, wherein the host system looks up the ~~stores a~~ merchant network address from the host system database using the merchant identifier to initiate a connection to one of ~~for~~ the in-store systems for retrieving the current inventory data.

13. (canceled)

14. (previously presented) The method of claim 6, wherein transmitting current inventory data from the in-store system to the host system further comprises either forwarding current inventory data to the subscriber system or storing the current inventory data in the host system for later access.

15. (new) The computer implemented system of claim 1, wherein the data distributor processes requests for inventory data by accessing the inventory data stored in the host system database for the merchant if the in-store system that corresponds to the merchant can not be reached.

16. (new) The computer implemented system of claim 1, wherein the data distributor processes requests for inventory data by requesting one of the in-store systems for current inventory data if the in-store system that corresponds to the merchant can be reached.

17. (new) The computer implemented system of claim 1, wherein the browser component is further able to point to a web page generated by the data distributor to search for quantity and pricing information for a desired item.

18. (new) The computer implemented system of claim 1, wherein the browser component is further able to point to a web page generated by the data distributor to a search which merchants who are in communication with the host system have desired items in stock.

19. (new) The computer implemented system of claim 1, wherein the host system comprises a permanent connection to the Internet while the in-store system fails to be connected to the Internet.

20. (new) The method of claim 6, wherein the inventory data is received periodically from the in-store systems, and wherein the inventor data is either forwarded to the subscriber system or stored in the host system database for later access by the subscriber system.

21. (new) The method of claim 6, wherein retrieving current inventory data from the in-store system in response to receiving a request for the current inventory data comprises retrieving current inventor data if the in-store system that corresponds to the merchant can not be reached.

22. (new) The method of claim 1, wherein retrieving current inventory data from the in-store system in response to receiving a request for the current inventory data comprises retrieving current inventory data if the in-store system that corresponds to the merchant can be reached.

23. (new) The method of claim 1, further comprising providing a permanent connection to the Internet while the in-store system fails to be connected to the Internet.

24. (new) A method for processing and distributing real-time inventory data through a communication network, comprising the steps of:

receiving merchant identification data and merchant network address data from an in-store system over the communication network;

indexing and storing merchant identification data and merchant network address data in a host system database;

periodically receiving inventory data from the in-store system over the communication network for storage in the host system database with the merchant identification data and the merchant network address data;

retrieving current inventory data from the in-store system using the merchant network address to initiate communication with the in-store system in response to receiving a request for current inventory data from a subscriber system for a merchant if the in-store system that corresponds to the merchant can be reached;

retrieving inventory data stored in the host system database in response to receiving a request for current inventory data from the subscriber system for a merchant if the in-store system that corresponds to the merchant can not be reached; and

formulating a response to said subscriber system using the current inventory data from the in-store system if the in-store system can be reached or using the inventory data stored in the host system database if the in-store system that corresponds to the merchant can not be reached.